FROM THE PRACTITIONERS:
CLOSING THE GAP AS RELATED TO SPECIAL EDUCATION

The summaries and comments below are compiled from site visits, conversations and meetings with principals, teachers, administrators, and other personnel in the following schools, districts and cooperatives: Bowling Green Independent, Caveland Special Education Cooperative, Earle D. Jones Elementary in Mason County, Highland Elementary in Daviess County, James Madison Middle School in Hopkins County, Jefferson County, Johnson County Middle School, Mason County, and North Hardin High School. These persons were asked what they were doing to close the special education achievement gap as well as to identify issues, challenges or barriers they feel are impeding their efforts in closing this gap.

In the first section below, staff from the Kentucky Department of Education identified schools that are successfully closing the gap between the achievement of students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. The findings are from site visits and what the personnel in these schools believe has contributed to their beginning success in reducing this gap. The findings were compiled from the following schools:

      Earle D. Jones Elementary
      Highland Elementary
      James Madison Middle
      Johnson County Middle
      North Hardin High School

Specific Findings/ Themes in Schools Closing the Special Education Achievement Gap:

Builds school and organizational culture
- Institutionalizes "system" changes- develops relationships, practices and procedures that become routine for all in the school; school-wide reform- almost no fragmented approaches or discrete programs or services (it's everybody's business/problem); initiatives are integrated with existing school programs and services
- Ensures sustainability- institutionalizes an active process that makes practices and procedures a lasting part of the school community; engages innovations throughout the school (large-scale, whole group initiatives); mobilizes consensus and support among staff and the community
- Avoids silver bullets and "project" mentality; leverages funding sources for whole school changes
- Everyone in school articulates a clear, shared vision for all students
- Principal and/or teacher leaders are designated for facilitating motivational readiness of staff for specific systemic changes (champions and advocates- especially for integrating special education students); special meetings and communication with parents of special education students to explain and gain acceptance for school-wide programs and services
- Cultivates a school climate that values and uses the assets and contributions of each staff member; focuses on skills of individuals and importance of working together
- Constantly assesses, evaluates and enhances programs and services

Rigorous curriculum for all students

- Attempts to fully include all students, with the flexibility to provide for individual student needs as necessary; provides a range of learning supports for special education as well as other students at risk; special education students given appropriate and required supports and accommodations
- Regular and special education teachers generally co-teach; co-teaching is accepted model of service delivery for special education students; teachers have common planning and shared responsibility of scheduling
- Joint professional development of all practitioners; emphasis on differentiated instruction and core content; ownership for needs of all students
- Instruction focuses on assuring that students learn curricular concepts and principles rather than strict adherence to textbooks or a highly sequential curriculum; teachers plan varied approaches to what students learn and vary curricular content, learning activities and products based on students; teachers use flexible and dynamic groupings, including peer tutoring, paired reading, learning centers, and whole group instruction
- Literacy is a focus at all levels and in all content; specific literacy programs/services provided
- Vertical and horizontal alignment and communication
- Continuous assessment drives instruction; teachers routinely assess students informally and base their instruction on this information
- Staff is given time to have frequent meetings to discuss specific needs of students within content

Accountability structures in place for dealing with achievement gaps

- Central office, school administration and all teachers are accountable for all students
- Definite achievement gap plan- whether in comprehensive school plan, committee, etc.; an intentional focus on the achievement gap
- Teachers are frequently evaluated and given feedback
- Monitoring the progress of each student is done frequently
- Frequent teacher interaction and collaboration
- Principal monitors instruction and ineffective teachers are placed on serious improvement plans or sometimes replaced

Uses data to close the achievement gap

- Administration and teachers constantly analyze student work
- Frequent team meetings to review data; data used to prioritize needs of students and the school
- Teachers look at individual student performance to determine the effectiveness of their instruction and make changes as necessary
- Regular Impact and Implementation checks conducted and discussed

High expectation for all students

- School has a "we will not accept failure attitude"; teachers and leaders do not accept mediocrity
- Leadership insists that all teachers operate from a "no failure" point of view

- All staff feel ownership and responsibility for all students' success
- Local board policies set tone for high expectations

Recognition for high achievement given to all students
- Student work is displayed inside and outside the classroom; work of special education students is not singled out or designated
- Work with the local newspaper to have students' recognized
- Students help and praise each other; student mentors are assigned

School and community dialogue and tools developed about achievement
- School Culture Audit assists schools to set policies and to examine conditions/factors that are impeding the learning of special education and other students
- Teachers plan home visits in the summer to meet the parents of upcoming students; parent contacts are frequent
- Administration has an "open door" policy
- Close relationship between school and businesses
- Staff is diligent and intentional about building relationships with students, parents, district, businesses, and churches

An environment that respects learning differences and cultural and socio-economic groups
- Supportive climate that addresses the emotional, intellectual and physical needs of all students; certified and classified staff engage in mentoring of students
- Works with truant students individually to encourage their attendance
- Multicultural Night for families to share cultural information
- Professional development for staff and students on diversity
- Parental involvement is varied, engaging and planned
- Physical environment is constantly examined to ensure it is inviting to students and parents
- Intentional efforts are made to provide leadership opportunities for all students

Expands teacher knowledge
- Daily team meetings and job-embedded professional development; reflection time is provided for teachers
- Shadowing, modeling, and mentoring of inexperienced teachers
- Central office supports the school's professional development program
- Principal regularly gives and sends teachers resources (e-mail, etc.)
- School leadership is generally shared

General Comments from Practitioners About What is Necessary to Close the Special Education Gap:

- To reach the target of proficiency for special education students requires a commitment from leadership to provide the necessary resources and organizational structures to support students with disabilities.

- Closing the special education gap involves focused efforts and resources on curriculum, assessment and interventions.
- Closing this gap requires accountability through data driven decision making at school and district levels.
- Districts need to assist their schools by providing them developed resources, materials, methods and strategies that are already research-based.
- In addition to all school personnel receiving professional development around special education, all district level staff should receive professional development specific to special education needs of students. This enhances the shared responsibility for the performance of all students.
- In order to encourage participation of special education students in the regular curriculum, districts should review their allocation of funds and consider targeting funds to schools to support best practices in the inclusion of students with disabilities (collaboration grants).
- Schools and districts must have an intensive plan for measuring how the professional development they offer impacts student achievement of all students.

Issues, Barriers, and Challenges to Closing the Special Education Gap as Identified by the Practitioners:

State policies/practices
- The discrete program and fiscal monitoring process utilized by KDE to satisfy federal regulations seems to be punitive in nature and discourages/inhibits local efforts to attempt blended service delivery options and student groupings in regular education settings.
- Consolidated planning is compromised by expenditure guidelines and separate funding streams associated with federal grants and state programs.
- The threat of litigation and an overwhelming array of legal mandates make school personnel reluctant to try new and innovative programming strategies for meeting the needs of special education students.
- The Kentucky Teacher Internship Program (KTIP) does not adequately address or present the special education arena. A component is needed that addresses collaborative teaching. KTIP needs to be revamped and restructured to include continuous support, coaching and mentoring until a teacher is tenured.
- Professional development guidelines should provide more flexibility to schools to structure professional development throughout the school year either before or after the school day instead of the four days set aside at the beginning of the school year. This would allow after-school professional development that would enable regular and special educators to experience joint professional development in content as well as on the needs of special education students.
- The Comprehensive School Improvement Plan process is not appropriate for schools' needs. Why address all 88 indicators when they know their specific needs?
- Teacher preparation programs are inadequate in addressing the differentiated needs students present and in knowledge about Core Content and the Program of Studies.
- There needs to be a KDE/Institutions of Higher Education/special education cooperative network to ensure continuous communication and agreement on special education issues and concerns.

- The varied interpretations of the parameters of collaboration among the Kentucky Department of Education, the Educational Professional Standards Board and school districts dissuade its use while research verifies its effectiveness (co-teaching, inclusion, highly-qualified teacher, resource services, NCLB rules, etc.).
- The state needs to develop and disseminate to schools a "how to" manual/guide on developing transition plans for students from school to higher education; there also needs to be emphasis and assistance given to successful transition K-12, not just to college.
- KDE should identify more schools that are effectively implementing collaboration so they can be model sites for others.
- KDE should provide guidelines to schools on improving the intervention phase in regular education programs for students having problems prior to referral to special education.
- The state should restructure accountability measures to direct more accountability to closing the gap for subpopulations and trigger more assistance to schools not closing the gaps.
- KDE should work with programs that grant administrative special education certification in reviewing the content of their programs to ensure it emphasizes a focus on integration of regular and special education instead of the old philosophy of separate programs.

Local: personnel/school relations/community
- The philosophy of "your kids" and us/them among teachers, leadership and central offices remains a barrier to collaboration.
- Regular education teachers feel no ownership for special education gap with a lack of shared accountability. How to make regular educators responsible and accountable for the achievement of special education students is missing.
- Regular education teachers fear ability to work with special education students; they are not prepared in teacher preparation programs.
- Special education teachers are certified but do not have "content" background or certification.
- Adjusting school schedules to provide the increased instructional time in the regular classroom that special education students require is difficult; many teachers don't know how.
- Individual student plans need to be taken more seriously and planning is needed earlier than the Individual Graduation Plan. The state needs to provide an individual planning process.
- More transition meetings and planning (elementary to middle, middle to high) need to occur to inform what would support individual learners.
- Many parents of special education students are the least likely supporters of collaborative teaching and inclusion.
- Schools need to do more self school culture assessments to assist them in revealing gap discrepancies.
- More school councils should exercise their authority to adopt policies on instructional practices, emphasizing that there is a set of expected teaching behaviors (collaboration), etc.
- School councils should make every effort to hire principals that show a grasp of the issues surrounding achievement gap issues and ideas for solving them.

- School districts need to devote more efforts to educating parents and teachers about achievement gap issues.

Professional development needs
- Guides and mechanisms for on-going and continuous assessment other than Kentucky Core Content Test
- Content specific differentiated instruction; job-embedded professional development opportunities for teachers to develop instructional strategies specific to student needs
- Diagnostic assistance in math; similar to literacy assessments and assistance in reading
- More assistance on the emotional/mental health needs of students
- Sessions on addressing and dispelling the cultural myths about special education students' inability and inferior intelligence
- How to help special education teachers help students get the most from regular education classes
- Lessons for regular education teachers who just don't know how to collaborate